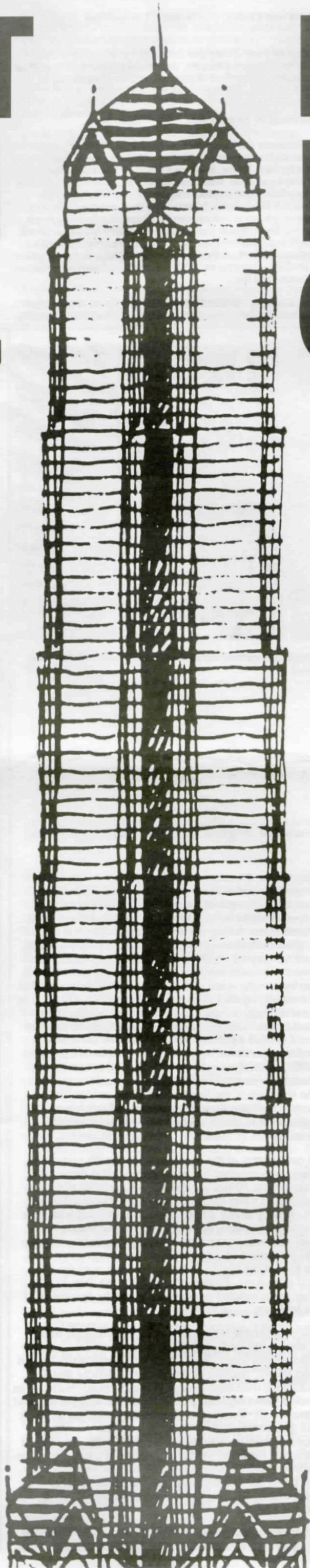


GREAT FROM AFAR,

FAR FROM GREAT



Helmut Jahn's Southwest Center

John Kaliski

In the spring of 1982 Southwest Bancshares, Inc. and Century Development provided three architectural firms, Kohn Pederson Fox Associates of New York, Murphy/Jahn of Chicago, and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill of Houston, with a straightforward agenda for a skyscraper competition:

"... design a timeless building of an institutional nature which would symbolize Houston's growth, strength and success and ... provide an architectural design which would have a lasting impact not only upon Houston's own skyline, but also upon the consciousness of national and international corporate leaders, business people and visitors."

The flurry of national publicity that surrounded the unveiling of Murphy/Jahn's winning design in October 1982 certainly brought to the developers desirable recognition. Articles in major Texas newspapers, *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the national architectural press attest to this fact. The tower, by sheer size alone, will make its mark on the Houston skyline. But whether the building will symbolize Houston's growth and success, or be seen as an icon of a past era of prosperity, is an issue that cannot be presently resolved.

Murphy/Jahn's Southwest Center is the newest in a line of ever taller buildings that chronicle the rapid accumulation of wealth by powerful Houston individuals, industries, and financial institutions. The Southwest Center's projected 1,395-foot height reflects the forces of speculative real estate economics, which demand huge buildings on small sites in order to profit from valuable downtown square-footage. There is, however, an older force at work here: the desire for institutional recognition translated into a symbolic quest for height — power. This quest is as ancient as the biblical legend of the unfinished Tower of Babel.

This newest addition to the skyline will tower over its neighbors — declaring its supremacy — its only rival in terms of visual dominance the five-mile distant, 64-story, 901-foot-high Transco Tower (1983, Johnson/Burgee Architects and Morris*Aubry Architects, architects). Sited one block east of the impressive wall of buildings along Smith Street that overlooks the Civic Center, the Southwest Center will emerge from a nest of structures, many of which once reigned supreme as this building seems destined to do.

Northeast of the new tower's site stands the 32-story Niels Esperson Building (John Ebersson, architect). The 1927 skyscraper, with its loveable cupola, was built by Mellie Esperson as a memorial to her dead husband. To the south of the proposed tower rises the 33-story, 500-foot aluminum-and-glass Tenneco Building (1963, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, architects), whose bulk overpowered the Houston skyline in the 1960s. To the west of Jahn's design is One Shell Plaza (1971, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill and Wilson, Morris, Crain and Anderson, architects), once the tallest reinforced concrete, framed-tube building in the world. Finally, southwest of Jahn's tower, the 71-story, 970-foot green reflective-glass Allied Bank Plaza (1983, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill and Lloyd Jones Brewer and Associates, architects) shares with the 75-story, 1,007-foot-high Texas Commerce Tower (1982, I.M. Pei and Partners and 3D/International, architects) to the north current honors as Tallest in Texas.

All of these structures, now a collective focus of visual attention, will create an active yet ultimately neutral backdrop for the Southwest tower. A new center of attention will be created. From a distance the Houston

skyline will regain that particular visual excitement lost when the split of Pennzoil Place (1976, Johnson/Burgee Architects and S.I. Morris Associates, architects) was obscured by new construction. The proliferation of mostly flat-topped, generally abstract, and often anonymous towers that now dominate the city will have a new focus. Downtown Houston (Johnson/Burgee's 56-story, 777-foot-high RepublicBank Center notwithstanding) will no longer look like downtown Dallas.

Traditionally, buildings in downtown Houston have respected the grid of streets laid out in 1836 by the Allen brothers. To the founders of Houston the grid represented an expedient, efficient system of dividing land for sale and resale. In recent times, as Houston's buildings became bigger, the distinct sense of rows of scaleless blocks, all marching in order, began to predominate. This phenomenon is especially marked along Smith Street between Capitol and Dallas, near the Southwest Center site, where each high-rise stands squarely on its individual block, projecting the rationalized and consumptive order of the grid onto the skyline.

The Southwest Center draws attention to itself by opposing this traditional order with its 45° rotation to the ruling grid. Such lack of respect for an existing condition works because the tower occupies the entire block. The building is intended to be read as a special object in an otherwise undifferentiated orthogonal field.

The rotation of the tower will be most effective from the distance and speed of the highway. Circling Houston's downtown on the expressways presents the car-bound viewer with a sculptural composition that is infinitely in movement with the ever-changing rush of the automobile. The 45° disposition of the Southwest Center will further activate that sense of movement which lies at the root of the often-noted dynamism of Houston's skyline. From the distant vantage point — from the freeway — the overall placement of the tower mass and its relation to the downtown context will appear provoking yet unforced. The Southwest Center, given the aspirations of the program, is correct for this skyline.

Helmut Jahn, the 43-year-old president and chief of design of Murphy/Jahn, has willfully shaped the slender, rotated mass of the structure into an obelisk that is set back in five-foot increments every 15 stories. The top of the building is gabled and formed into four giant, pointed dormers which come together to form the base of a 120-foot aluminum spire. The gabled motif at the top of the building recurs at the base in four 100-foot-high entrance porches that project outward from the rotated shaft. A curtain-wall of reflective glass and narrowly spaced aluminum mullions is centered above each of the entrance porches and rises 82 stories to the upper gables. In compositional counterpoint to this sheer vertical ascent are the edges of the shaft, reinforced with horizontal bands of flush granite and tiers of recessed strip windows. The striped effect evokes from afar a reduction and transformation of a similar motif that occurs on William Van Alen's Chrysler Building in New York of 1930. The base of the Southwest Center will also be horizontally striped with different colors of granite. There the stripes will be approximately the height of a man. At the entrance porches, the stripes will lose their flush-jointed finish and suggest giant three-dimensional rustication.

Jahn has written that "the design of the Southwest Center represents an effort to create an 'Historical Continuum,' juxtaposing the spirit and richness of past forms and present-day techniques and materials." "Obelisk," "rustication," "gable," "spire," "Chrysler Building": these are words that evoke the history of architectural images as well as the current retreat from the reductive modernist aesthetic of the 1950s and 1960s. With its multiple sources of inspiration, Jahn's Southwest Center breaks the narrow compositional formalism that has informed many of Houston's recent skyscrapers. Even the eclecticism of Philip Johnson's Transco Tower and RepublicBank Center is not as fevered as the multi-material, multi-layered, and collaged imagery of Jahn's tower.



To question the use of imagery in a building which through size alone makes an impact on its environment is perhaps meaningless in an era where fickle fashion rules. Nevertheless, the lack of semantic rigor as evidenced by the skin of the Southwest Center raises serious issues with regard to urban place-making which cannot be begged off. While one cannot deny the importance of the Chrysler Building in the mythology of the American skyscraper, what is its symbolic relevance, beyond personal design whim, to an oil-patch bank-scraper of the 1980s?

The Chrysler Building was a corporate set piece that addressed through a rigorous ornamental program Walter P. Chrysler's marketing needs. This *Art Déco* skyscraper projected a jazzy image, complete with hood-ornament gargoyles and hub-cap entablatures made of molded brick. The racy styling was a metaphor for the romance and imagery of the automobiles that Chrysler hoped to sell to the American public. While this ornamental program has inevitably become historical in terms of promotional relevance, its insistent suggestion in every detail made the Chrysler Building a rich document that still can move the imagination of those who experience it, much the way a figuratively-ornamented church, library, or train station does. One must ask whether the consumption and reduction of this particular architectural image (or any of the others mentioned) for a skyscraper in Houston does not impoverish the latter's content, rendering it fashionable, yet unintelligible.

The Southwest Center will be bigger than the sum of its parts. Yet a critical analysis of these parts raises questions about the efficacy of an imagery detached from the institutional and historical context that it ostensibly is serving. Ultimately, the tower's obelisk shape, its orientation, and its size overwhelm these questions; monumentality is achieved in spite of the irresolute nature of the building's skin.

During the 1970s Murphy/Jahn became well-known for buildings that manneristically expressed their structural and mechanical components, a tendency recently defined as "romantic high-tech."³ While the structural system of the Southwest Center (designed by LeMessurier Associates/SCI of Cambridge, Massachusetts with Walter P. Moore and Associates) is advanced, the exaggeration of the pragmatic parts of the structure has been cast aside for a new emphasis on image-making.

Southwest Center, The Houston Competition

Edited by Peter Arnell and Ted Bickford; essays by William Pederson, Richard Keating, and Helmut Jahn; review by Paul Goldberger, New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1983, 119 pp., 230 illus., \$14.95

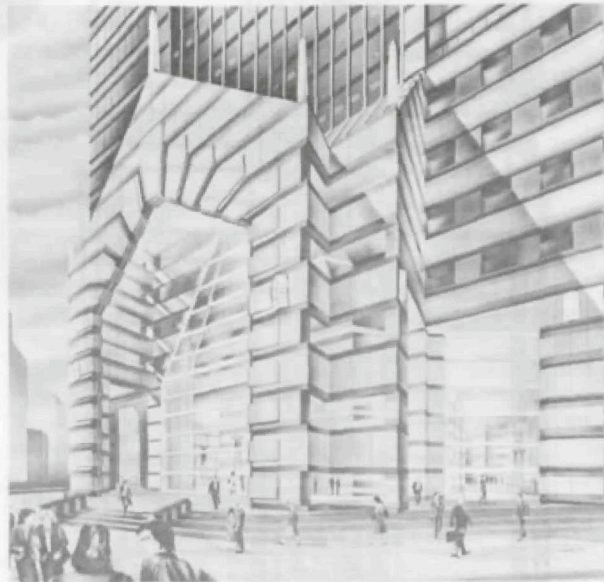
Reviewed by Stephen Fox

To document the three schemes submitted in 1982 by Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, and Murphy/Jahn for the Southwest Center office tower (see "Great From Afar, Far From Great", p. 10), two enterprising young New York graphic designers, Peter Arnell and Ted Bickford, have issued the second in their projected series of monographs on recent architectural competitions. *Southwest Center, The Houston Competition* is a slight but elegant book. Arnell and Bickford have appropriated Massimo Vignelli's *Oppositions* look, reduced the format slightly, and added color to produce a sumptuous "little" document that exudes preciousness and luxe.

The disturbing element in this suave production is the pretentiousness that emanates from its multiple texts. The prose style

of the introductory chapters is inane, a sort of public-relations blurb-ese that is the more disconcerting for its elegant graphic context. In the essays with which each of the three designers, William Pedersen, Richard Keating, and Helmut Jahn, prefaced the illustrations of his firm's project, this tendency surfaces in a more subtle and involuntary form, in a divergence between expressed intentions and architectural results. For instance, the notions of contextual fit and urbanistic responsibility are reiterated, but none of the designs grows out of an analysis of the site and its surroundings, and none acknowledges architecturally the presence of the existing Bank of the Southwest Building. (Ironically, this rather dumpy '50s skyscraper incorporates all the responsible urbanistic attributes for which the three architects profess such reverence.) A concern for the discipline of typology is another recurring theme. But as the exemplar of the urbane skyscrapers of the 1920s, the Chrysler Building is consistently cited, a building that was dismissed as gauche, frivolous, and vulgar when completed in 1930. Neither in obeisance to the oft-invoked *genius loci* nor in a discriminating awareness of architectural history (as opposed to the popular mythology of the present) do the architects' texts persuade when compared to their designs.

Paul Goldberger, in the book's concluding essay, obliquely acknowledges these problems in his critique of the two



Perspective view of base (Drawing by J. Smith, Murphy/Jahn)

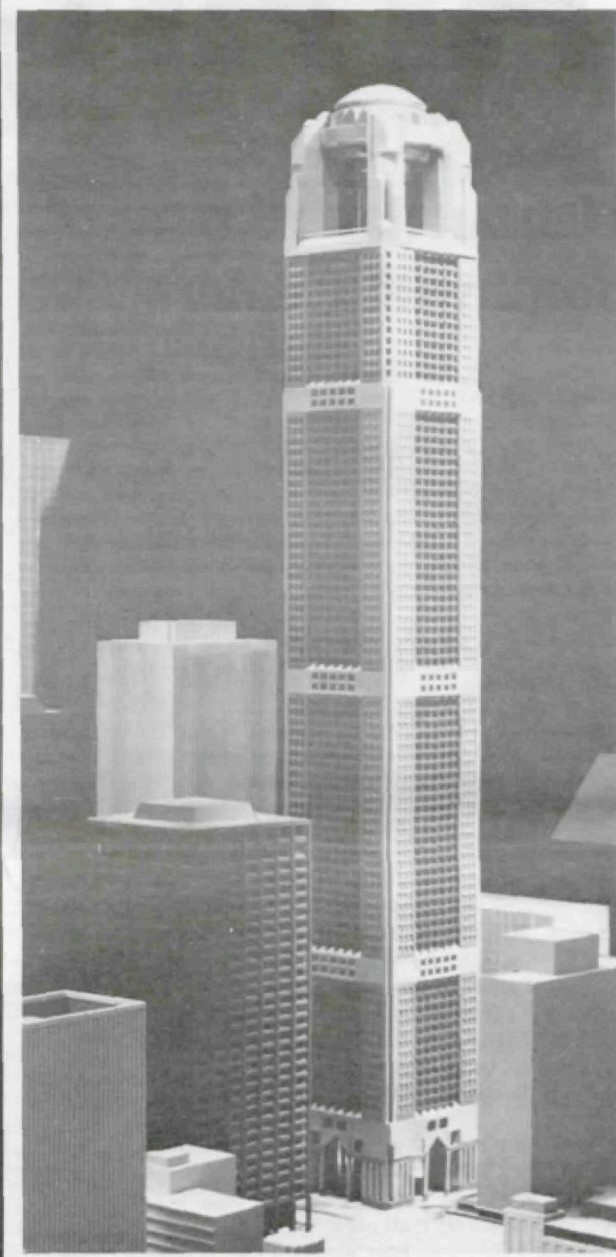
Southwest Center, 1982, Murphy/Jahn and Lloyd Jones Brewer and Associates, architects, model (Murphy/Jahn)

Beneath the aluminum, granite, and glass skin of the Southwest Center lies a structural system that departs from the technique of framed-tube construction employed in high-rise buildings here and elsewhere in the United States during the last 15 years.⁴ The first skyscrapers built in this country relied on a jungle-gym of steel for support. With refinements this technique continued to be used until the 1960s when engineers found that by moving more of the structure to the outside edge of the building they could achieve significant savings in material while increasing the building's ability to resist wind forces. This stiffened tube, analogous to the cardboard tube of a paper towel roll, became the almost-exclusive means of supporting very tall buildings in the 1970s. Recently, engineers have begun to carve away this tube to make, in effect, giant vertical trusses. The structure of the Southwest Center utilizes this new method with a system of both steel and reinforced concrete. It is akin to a giant trussed bridge turned on its end.

At each corner of the Southwest Center are a pair of reinforced-concrete "super columns" that diminish in section from 10 feet by 15 feet at the bottom of the building to 5 feet by 5 feet at the top. These columns, which carry nearly all of the loads associated with each floor and the wind, are stabilized with repeating nine-story diagonals tying the paired super columns together. The placement of these super columns is notated on the skin of the building by the stone edges of the vertical glass zone. Besides this one gesture there is no other manifestation of engineering on the exterior of the building.

The engineering techniques incorporated in the design of the Southwest Center allow for column-free leasable office space. The offices inside will additionally benefit from the 45° rotation of the building. Offices that directly face their high-rise neighbors typically suffer from limited views extending only across the street to the next curtain-wall. Turning the Southwest Center on its block will guarantee good views at lower levels past the surrounding buildings to the landscape beyond. Lessees of the upper stories of the building will, of course, have unimpeded vistas from their windows. The 79th floor of this tower has been designated as a public observation level where, on clear days, one should be able to see the Gulf of Mexico.

If the office environment and the views from within the Southwest Center promise to be less claustrophobic than



Project: Southwest Center, 1982, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, architects, model (Skidmore, Owings and Merrill)

The Runners-Up

Century Development and Southwest Bancshares interviewed over 30 architects before inviting three firms — Murphy/Jahn, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, and Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates — to submit proposals in competition for the design of Southwest Bancshare's skyscraper headquarters in March 1982. Murphy/Jahn won the competition, but the sponsors made the other two entries public at the same time that they announced the Southwest Center in October 1982.

Skidmore, Owings and Merrill proposed a square-planned, 80-story, 2.35 million square-foot shaft to rise 1,370 feet. The imageability for which the clients called was derived from SOM partners Richard Keating and Fazlur Khan's use of Khan's version of the "super-column." This logically developed the implications of Bruce Graham and Fazlur Khan's design for One Shell Plaza, concentrating structure at the four corners of the building. By locating four separate elevator cores within these reinforced corners, it became possible to create a monumental, 110-foot high, open-air space beneath the tower and to treat the top of the building as a "crystal-line dome held on four sides like a diamond solitaire," as SOM described the five-level, airborne restaurant and observation deck structure. Practically, it made three separate entries possible, appealing to the corporate egos of three potential major tenants. Differentiations in the window pattern and the color of the granite-clad curtain-wall articulated the structural idea of the building. Beneath the monumental loggia lay a

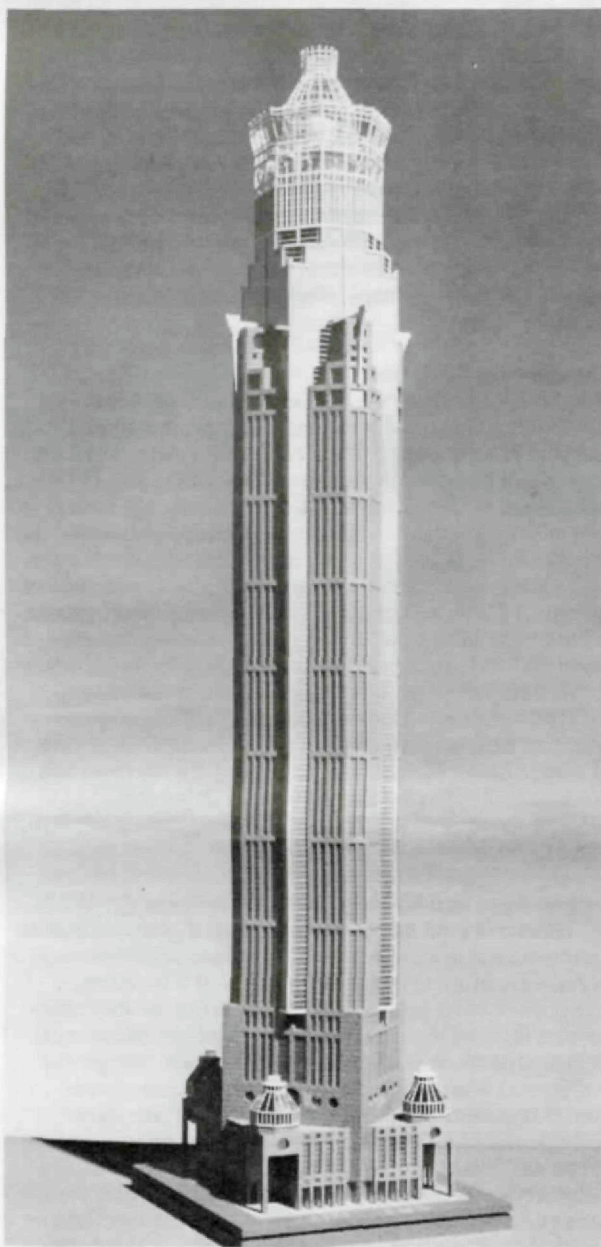
runners-up, the Kohn Pedersen Fox and SOM schemes. He praises Murphy/Jahn's winning design for its compositional refinement and its neat integration of referential imagery with contemporary techniques and materials. Tactfully, Goldberger refrains from implying that any other architect might have done a better job. Works by Philip Johnson, Michael Graves, and Cesar Pelli are mentioned but not directly contrasted with any of the three submissions for adroit use of *Art Déco* imagery, brilliant displays of spatially configured planning, or the development of an architectural code that fluently articulates current ways and means of tall building.

Although the most successful new tall buildings in downtown Houston do not attempt as much as the architects of the Southwest Center sought to achieve in their designs, these buildings do embody some important characteristics in which the Southwest Center schemes appear deficient. For example, the First City Tower (1981, Morris*Aubry Architects, architects) is shaped to define outdoor spaces that respond to the presence of surrounding tall buildings. Combined with an open, elevator lobby that, while only an elevator lobby, is nonetheless a beautiful urban room, and a lyrically choreographed arrangement of outdoor sculpture, this gesture results in the creation of a special place that invites public occupation. Across the street, the 1010 Lamar Building (1981, Nasr, Penton and As-

sociates and Klein/Falick Partnership, architects) contains an array of internal public circulation, exhibition, restaurant, and shop spaces ingeniously composed in section to provide a sense of variety and richness on a constricted site where open plazas were not feasible. Without resorting to imagery excess, the architects of these two buildings used the factors of site, surroundings, and certain notions about public space to make tall buildings that architecturally contributed to the city rather than exploiting it as a mere backdrop.

The three Southwest Center entries fall short of the terms that their architects set for themselves. Each has something to recommend it. Kohn Pedersen Fox's design is the most rigorously derived. Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's features the most innovative programmatic interpretation and the best public space. Murphy/Jahn's emerges as the most ingratiating, simply because it appears to fulfill the criteria for achieving contemporary landmarks that Jahn adduces in his essay: buildings that "act as a theatre for a futuristic world-of-tomorrow ambience, [that] create excitement, surprise, and are intended to be people-pleasing." Yet all three remain fixated objects rather than urban fragments.

Southwest Center, The Houston Competition does not dwell on this collective shortcoming. Arnell and Bickford's book is celebratory, not critical. As such it is a handsome artifact.

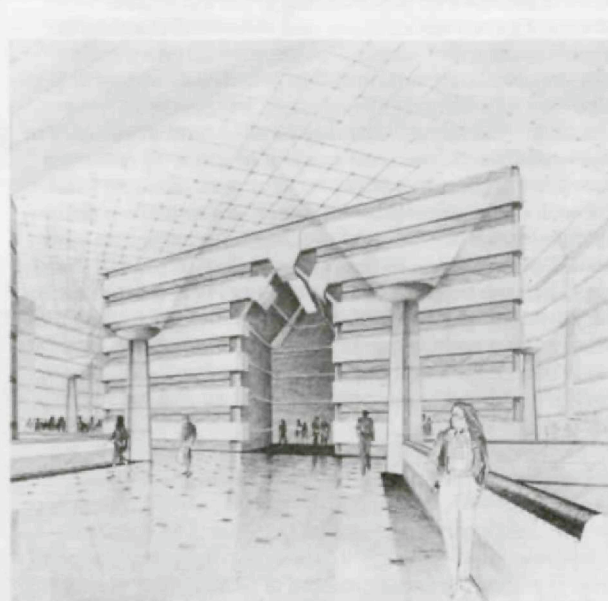


Project: Southwest Center, 1982, Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates, architects, model (Kohn Pederson Fox Associates)

tunnel-level concourse, accessible directly from the street, and two levels of parking.

Kohn Pederson Fox Associates' William Pederson and Sudhir Jambhekar, in association with LeMessurier Associates/SCI, proposed a 94-story, 2 million square-foot tower. Like SOM, Kohn Pederson Fox used the tower's structural system to generate its complex form; the architecture literally rose out of the structure. A cruciform envelope of closely-spaced concrete piers, turned on the diagonal and faced externally with granite, was penetrated by thin, projecting slices of green glass. Above the 73rd floor, these slices emerged to form a square-planned, glazed shaft crowned by an octagonal superstructure of white-painted steel containing the restaurant and observation deck. At the street level, monumentally scaled, five-story loggias capped with steel and glass lanterns were stationed at the four corners of the block to provide access to the lobby and the central elevator core. Flanking each of the loggias and opening both to the street and the lobby were spaces designated for retail use. A covered passage was to surround the perimeter of the building. Beneath grade lay a tunnel-level concourse (not open to the street as in the Murphy/Jahn and SOM proposals) and two levels of parking.

Southwest Bancshare's impending merger with the Dallas-based Mercantile Texas Corporation brings yet another tower into the picture. For Mercantile is planning to move up from the 33-story Mercantile National Bank Building of 1942 (W.W. Ahlschlager, architect), the tallest building in Texas from 1942 until 1963, to a 60-story building, presently in design, by Johnson/Burgee Architects of New York.



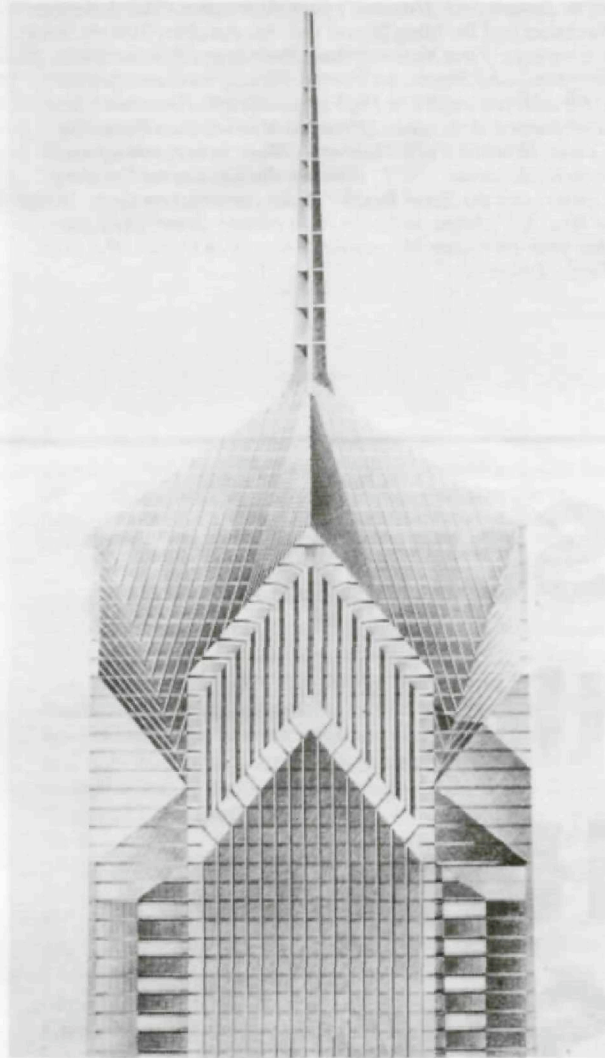
Perspective view of entrance lobby (Drawing by J. Smith, Murphy/Jahn)

Conceptual sketches by Helmut Jahn (Murphy/Jahn)

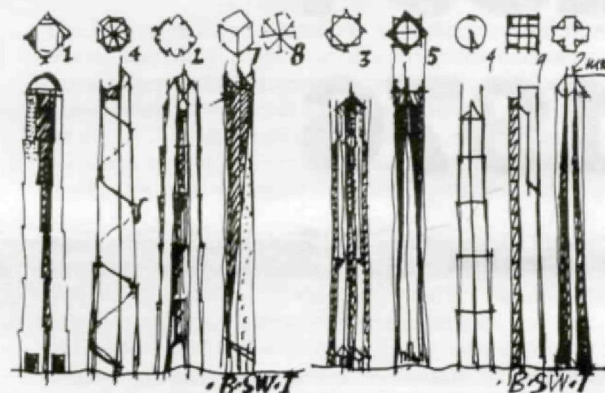
those in typical downtown office structures, the manner in which the building is integrated with the street and tunnel system suggests that Houstonians will experience merely an exaggerated version of what already exists. Entrances to the Southwest Center will occur under the giant 100-foot high porticoes, stationed prominently at the street corners, signifying their importance for blocks in every direction. Given the size and inherent monumentality of these porches, one is led to expect a significant public space within the building. Instead, present drawings suggest an anticlimactic and empty entrance lobby at the street level occupied only by the elevator core and escalators to the tunnel network below. The lobby of this obelisk-shaped tower will thus be little different from the lesser lobbies of the speculative office structures that make up most of downtown Houston.

The user of this building, the largest building in downtown Houston, visible for miles around, confronts in the lobby a series of light wells, regulated by the geometry of the building, that open to the tunnel level below. If the intention underlying the design of these wells was to invite passersby to come in from the street and descend, their 25-foot distance from the sidewalk renders the shafts gratuitous. There is little looking-up to the street from below, and very little looking-down. The opportunity to bring the tunnel activity up to the level of the street and into the building is lost. The possibility of celebrating the arrival of visitors intent on a view from the observatory is diminished by the corporate sobriety that informs the public space. A building as prominent as the Southwest Bancshares tower could have at least a wonderful banking hall with a clear and direct relation to the street. Unfortunately, banking, shopping, eating, watching — in short, the activities that bring life to the public spaces of a city — are relegated to the basement in this building. People should expect more than a quick elevator ride up to an observatory or an escalator ride down to an orderly and sanitized mole's nest.

Once one recognizes that the economic forces that shaped this building are not dissimilar to the forces of corporate form-making that spawned its high-rise neighbors, one is not surprised at the experiential similarity. Any quality that this proposed tower has results simply from the amplification of these forces. Any fault that can be discerned reminds the viewer of the faults of many other downtown buildings. The Southwest Center is more of the same, only bigger and more stylistically current. The tower strengthens the picturesque quality of



Detail, elevation of summit (Murphy/Jahn)



the Houston skyline. The offices within promise to have spectacular views. At the level of the pedestrian, however, nothing substantially new is offered. Given the visual gesturing and the magnitude of the undertaking, too many opportunities for positive urban place-making are being missed.

In his oft-quoted essay on the Eiffel Tower, Roland Barthes evoked the emptiness of this monument as one of its most powerful attributes. For Barthes there was only one use for the Eiffel Tower: it functioned as a symbol of Paris and France for the world. Precisely because the Eiffel Tower is empty, yet always present, "it means everything." The Houston skyline, though suffering from current economic conditions, is inhabited. Yet from the freeway, from the detached environment of the car, its emptiness is virtual. The Southwest Center will provide to this sensed emptiness a powerful center, a monumental focus for masses in movement, a point of reference for the confused. Houston's skyline, not its downtown, will continue to mature.

Postscript

Groundbreaking for the Southwest Center, originally scheduled for the fall of 1983, has been postponed until late 1984. As of this writing, the Federal Aviation Administration has refused to readjust its 1,049-foot height ceiling on construction in downtown Houston. The Southwest Center would rise about 390 feet above that level. Because this ceiling is not enforced by the City of Houston, Southwest Bancshares and Century Development can disregard it. Working with Murphy/Jahn as associated architects are Lloyd Jones Brewer and Associates.

Notes

1. Peter Arnell and Ted Bickford, eds., *Southwest Center The Houston Competition*, New York, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1983, 10.
2. Arnell and Bickford, eds., *Southwest Center The Houston Competition*, 82.
3. Margaret Gaskie, "Toward Romantic High-Tech," *Progressive Architecture*, vol. 64, January 1983, 102-115.
4. See Fazlur R. Khan, "Multi-Story Buildings: Recent Structural Systems in Steel for High-Rise Buildings," Section 2, Paper 1 from *BCSA Conference on Steel in Architecture*, Bethlehem Steel Corporation, 1969.
5. Roland Barthes, "The Eiffel Tower," in *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1979, 4.